A Critical Reflection on Social Identity

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Issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion must be reflective in nature. That is, a person must take the time to understand and be aware of hirself as a member of several social identity groups. Through that reflection and analysis, one can begin to develop knowledge and skills framed by situational self-awareness. As I prepare to become a professional in higher education, it is important for me to understand how my social identities construct the foundation on which I interact with issues of multiculturalism. In this critical reflection I will use the framework of relevant literature and course activities to analyze my multicultural competence as it relates to my personal and professional development.

Examination of Social Identities

In order to critically analyze the social identities I carry, it is important to view each as influencing, and being influenced by, each other social identity. Giroux (1997) provided an example of this when explaining that an individual’s “sense of Whiteness is likely to be nuanced, complicated, and dynamic because it becomes informed by the multiple other identities [the] individual possesses” (as cited in Reason, 2007, p. 128). With this in mind, I have chosen three specific identities to examine that have significantly contributed to my multicultural competence thus far. I will use this section to assess their significance and analyze them through the context of relevant literature.

Race

As a White person in the United States, race has significantly impacted my perception of social identity as well as the socialization process that impacts it. Once I entered higher education, race became a salient topic in the classroom, leadership workshops, student organization involvement, and employment. However, while it was present, I still feel
uncomfortable and am unequipped to articulate what it means to me to be White. As introduced in Reason (2007), I recognize the significance and relevance of my race to my interactions with others, but I have not developed the language by which I can express them. This is supported by the low scores I selected on the exercise “Assessing Your Multicultural Competencies” regarding multicultural skills and race (Obear, 2008). In particular, I responded with low scores on items S7 (“Describe the exclusionary dynamics you track: in the moment and later in discussions”) and S8 (“Engage in effective dialogues with members of dominant and subordinated groups about dynamics of inclusion and exclusion on campus”). Both of these items measure one’s ability to articulate awareness and knowledge regarding race. Because of my role as an educator and student advocate in an increasingly diverse environment, I recognize this identity and my development of skills related to it is extremely important.

Socialization is the primary concept through which I have begun to understand my Whiteness. In particular, Pieterse and Collins (2007) and Young (1990) shed light on the way socialization and norms create the lens through which I see the world as well as the framework which I use to interact with it. Young’s (1990) explanation of cultural imperialism resonated with me regarding my race because of the extent to which it affirmed the American ideal of individualism. Specifically, as a man socialized into a White-dominant culture, it has allowed me to retain a sense of individuality and project that paradigm onto others. Moreover, as Reason (2007) states, I have had numerous opportunities for intellectual exploration of race and equity issues related to it, but have not had to engage in critical self-reflection about my race. Given this trend, it is no surprise that I consider my knowledge and awareness to be stronger than my skills in the area. Finally, future examination of the intersection of my race and ethnicity is important because of my unique experience as an adopted son in a mixed-race home. While I do
not think I am equipped to analyze the implications of that at this point, the contribution of an additional subjectivity will be significant for future analysis (Reason, 2007).

**Sexual Orientation**

Bieschke (2002) presents the idea that heterosexual identity development has not been explored because of the assumption that heterosexuality is normative (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). This argument supports my undergraduate college experience as a heterosexual man. In particular, the model created by Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, and Vernaglia (2002) provides insight into the effect that group affiliation and privilege had on my development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). For example, I had the opportunity to engage in serious conversations about heterosexual privilege as a member of the New Student Orientation team. Reflecting on that experience, I can identify conversations in which our student affair staff members engaged all students in order to examine the underlying assumptions we made about each other. Through this, I began to recognize the extent to which everyone participates in oppression (Pieterse & Collins, 2007). While I can see evidence of Worthington et al.’s (2002) model in my heterosexual identity development, it is important to continue to critically reflect on my sexual orientation in order to better equip myself to support students in the development of their sexual identities.

One opportunity for further exploration of my heterosexual identity and privilege comes from Worthington et al.’s (2002) explanation of the final stage of heterosexual identity development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). The final stage, synthesis, involves reconciling and making compatible other social identities with one’s individual and group sexual identity (Worthington et al., 2002 as cited in Evans et al., 2010). For example, through reflection and analysis of my other social identities, I may become more aware of how I might approach and
navigate working at an institution with an unfriendly climate for LGBT students. That is, given potentially unwelcoming issues such as “registration services, housing policies, health care policies, and restroom availability,” synthesis of my social identities with my heterosexual identity should equip me to best support students (Kupo, 2011).

Religion

Examination of my social identities to this point includes two privileged identities. Given many of my other social identities (e.g. man, able-bodied, college educated, middle class), I am predominantly a member of privileged groups and thus have rarely considered privilege or oppression unless encouraged to do so (Watt, 2007). However, with religion and spirituality, I have moved from a member of a privileged group (Catholic) to a member of a marginalized group (Agnostic/Atheist/Deist). While this identity is not necessarily visible or active in my daily life, it has been developed through awareness and knowledge on the issue. As Watt (2007) proposed, my awareness developed from difficult dialogues surrounding issues of religion and sexual orientation. Specifically, I could not reconcile the Catholic Church’s stance toward the LGBT community with my own views and beliefs. Because of this, I began to contemplate and eventually address issues of religious privilege.

The significance of religion as a social identity for me is strong because of the lens it provides me for viewing my other social identities in terms of privilege and oppression. The cognitive dissonance I experienced when juxtaposing my religion and other beliefs created an opportunity for me to understand firsthand the normalization of dominant culture’s values orientations (Pieterse & Collins, 2007). Specifically, I had grown up as a Catholic being taught that marriage should be between a male and a female as well as that heterosexual relationships were the only acceptable sexual relationships. Having the opportunity to engage these premises
during college, I determined that my beliefs regarding inclusion and equity were more important than my religion. While this originated as a dualistic viewpoint (i.e. religion or inclusion), it has grown over the years to a more genuine examination of the relationship between the two. With this, I have been able to develop strong skills such as the ability to “navigate strong emotions and triggering events: when [I] and/or others feel triggered” and “’relate in’ and ‘see [myself] in others,’ instead of judging them or distancing from them” (Obear, 2008). Moreover, this lens has supported my multicultural competency development through motivating me to continue to seek out and gather knowledge (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). This motivation will become increasingly important for my development as a student affairs professional.

Course Issues and Content

Overall, the self-examination of my social identities has helped me connect various parts of the literature and course content to my life as a developing graduate student and future student affairs professional. While I examined each of my identities through the frameworks of our various readings and discussions, there are certain issues in the course content that resonate with me more than others.

Multicultural Knowledge

To this point, the content of the course has challenged me to explore areas of literature and practice with which I have little previous experience. Moreover, the diversity of subject matter that fits under the umbrella of multiculturalism has helped me think divergently over the first few weeks. For example, Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) identify privilege, power, and oppression as key concepts that practitioners must have knowledge of in order to fully understand multiculturalism. Prior to this course, I had not actively thought about these concepts as distinct and categorically different than multiculturalism as a whole. While I may have
recognized their difference, it was not until reading Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller that I have begun to recognize them as distinct. Most significant in this category of knowledge is the continuous revealing of new subject matter and concepts to which I previously had little exposure. To put it simply, the more I read and discover, the more I begin to realize I do not know.

**Multicultural Skills**

There are two facets of multicultural skill development that have struck me as extremely important thus far in the course. First, skills may be developed at times without prior multicultural knowledge. Obear’s (2008) instrument was enlightening because there were many instances in which I rated my skills as much higher than my knowledge. This was shocking initially because it seems counterintuitive to suggest that a person can have skills without any knowledge related to those skills. However, this reaffirmed the importance of developing multicultural knowledge in order to refine and maximize skills. In essence, it is a quality reminder of the equal importance of theory and practice. While this pattern of skills without knowledge struck me, a second equally important concept has arisen from class discussions and readings. Nearly all readings and class discussions have framed multicultural competency development as a lifelong process, an area of practice, or a competency with no end-point (Pieterse & Collins, 2007; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004; Reason, 2007). As mentioned in the analysis of my social identities, I do not think I have given much consideration to these issues in my life yet. With that in mind, I often feel discouraged and think I am behind in this development relative to those around me. However, each of these readings has helped me recognize that all student affairs professionals need to be diligent about being attentive to and developing their multicultural competence.
Application to Professional Life

Given the previous point about continual development of multicultural competence, it is clear that there is a connection between effective student affairs professionals and multicultural competence. More specifically, there are certain points that highlight the need for higher education professionals to be effective in working with diverse student populations. While access to higher education was limited to specific social groups for a long time, the 1950s and 1960s were times of increased access to and diversification of higher education (Kupo, 2011). With laws and funding supporting a more diverse student population, campuses are experiencing increasing heterogeneity. Moreover, environmental theory posits that safety and inclusion are necessary and fundamental attributes of good learning environments (Strange & Banning, 2001). With students from diverse backgrounds on campus, it is essential that professionals are able to “create a more welcoming and affirming environment for all students” (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004, p. 27). As I strive to create positive education environments, it is imperative that I have the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to work with students from diverse backgrounds. Finally, given the holistic approach to education advocated by student affairs professionals, multicultural competence becomes important for serving the developmental needs of students. As we move forward in this course, these premises lay the foundation for the importance of multicultural competency development.
Works Cited


